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Viewing cable 09SANAA2117, SA'ADA CEASEFIRE DISCUSSIONS UNDERWAY

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Understanding cables

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANAA2117	2009-11-23 15:15	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Sanaa

Appears in these articles:

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3269
INFO RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1706

S E C R E T SANAA 002117

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/23/2019

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SUBJECT: SA'ADA CEASEFIRE DISCUSSIONS UNDERWAY

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Well-informed sources, including one involved directly in preliminary talks, report that both the ROYG and the Houthis are looking for a way to stop the fighting in northern Yemen. While the Houthis apparently have accepted the RQG's five ceasefire conditions, there is an impasse as to whether these conditions must be implemented before a ceasefire is announced or immediately after. The matter is further complicated by Saudi Arabia's involvement in the war: Saleh cannot reach a ceasefire with the Houthis if the SAG is still fighting them, nor will he have much incentive to do so if the SAG continues to support the war effort militarily and financially. It is hard to say how far these ceasefire talks will go, but they are the first serious effort that we know of to bring the Sixth War to an end politically rather than militarily. END SUMMARY.

SALEH MEETINGS WITH HOUTHI ENVOY

¶2. (S/NF) Well-informed sources, including some involved directly in preliminary talks, report that both the ROYG and the Houthis are looking for a way to stop the fighting in northern Yemen. Presidential advisor Abdul Karim al-Iryani told the Ambassador on November 22 that efforts were indeed underway to agree on terms for a ceasefire. The Houthis have chosen Hassan Zaid, chairman of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and native of Sa'ada, to act as their intermediary with President Saleh. Zaid told PolOff on November 21 that he met with Saleh on November 19 to discuss conditions for a ceasefire. According to Zaid, Saleh insisted that once the Houthis accept the ROYG's five ceasefire conditions, he would form a commission to work out details regarding implementation of the ceasefire. (Note: The ROYG's five ceasefire conditions required of the Houthis are: 1) withdraw from the mountains, remove mines, open roads, and commit to a ceasefire; 2) withdraw from districts and refrain from interfering with local authorities; 3) return seized and stolen military and civilian equipment; 4) release detainees; and 5) respect the law and the constitution. End Note.) Iryani confirmed that a mediation committee is now being formed in the event that hostilities cease. According to Zaid, Saleh proposed the ceasefire commission consist of Northwest Regional Commander Ali Muhsin, Ali al-Jayfi, head of the Giants brigade, and Faisal Rajab, a southern military commander, while the Houthis proposed they be represented by Abdulkarim Amir Adim al-Houthi, Saleh Ahmed Habra, and Saleh al-Samaad.

¶3. (S/NF) Zaid held a subsequent meeting with the President on November 22 to deliver a letter from Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam agreeing to the five conditions, clarifying their objectives (such as denying that they want to re-establish the imamate), and shaming Saleh for "staying idle while children and women are killed by missiles and airplanes of the Saudi regime." Zaid told PolOff on November 23 that he emerged from the meeting very disappointed, as there was no progress or tangible outcome. He reported that, on one hand, Saleh appeared to indicate that he wanted to stop the war but could not, because he complained that Hussein and Hamid al-Ahmar, leaders of the Hashid tribal confederation, want to keep the war going. Zaid also had the impression Saleh would not end the war as long as the Saudis

continued funding and supporting it.

CEASEFIRE SEQUENCING UNCLEAR

14. (S/NF) One of the elements that remains unclear, according to Zaid, is the sequencing of the implementation of the ceasefire relative to the implementation of the five ceasefire conditions. The Houthis have pledged to implement the five conditions within a day of the cessation of military operations. During that time, both parties would open roads, begin to clear the area of mines, come down from the mountains, and stop interfering with local authorities. Iryani told the Ambassador that he believes the essential first step is for Abdul Malik al-Houthi to publicly announce the rebels' acceptance of the ROYG's five points. He said this is the only way Saleh will move forward, since it has become the government's bottom line for a settlement. A public statement by the Houthis would enable Saleh to say to the families of the soldiers who have died and the Yemeni people in general that the sacrifices they made were not in vain. (Note: While the Houthis have communicated their acceptance of the five conditions to the President, they have not yet made it public. End Note.)

SOLVING THE PROBLEM AT ITS ROOTS

15. (S/NF) Through their intermediary, the Houthis also presented the President with a list of their conditions for "guaranteeing a final resolution" to the conflict. (Note: Iryani confirmed that the Houthis were presenting conditions of their own for the ceasefire to hold. End Note.) According to a document Zaid gave PolOff on November 21, these conditions are:

-- The formal announcement of a ceasefire, the cessation of all mobilization of ground troops, and allowing IDPs to return to their homes;

-- The release of all prisoners of war and the clarification of the fates of the disappeared;

-- Actions to address the impact of the war through reconstructing destroyed infrastructure and compensating civilians for looted properties;

-- The "normalization of life in Sa'ada" through the following steps: 1) The army's withdrawal from villages and farms in order to demilitarize public and private properties in Sa'ada. (Comment: It is not clear if the Houthis will allow the military to remain in their posts on mountaintops. End Comment.); 2) Genuine economic development and delivery of basic services; 3) Ending cultural and political discrimination against the Zaydi population; and 4) Allowing civil servants to return to their jobs and giving them back-pay for the time they were separated from their posts.

SIMULTANEOUS SAUDI ARABIA TRACK

16. (S/NF) According to NDI Deputy Director Murad Zafir, reaching a ceasefire has been complicated by the SAG's involvement: Saleh cannot announce a ceasefire if the Saudis are still fighting the Houthis, nor will he have any incentive to do so if the SAG continues providing cash and weapons for the war. Zafir told PolOff that the Saudis had approached Hussein al-Ahmar to serve as a mediator with the Houthis. Zaid confirmed this, saying Ahmar then called him to consult about possible terms the Houthis might accept. (Note: Hussein al-Ahmar has mobilized hundreds of Hashid tribesmen to fight alongside the ROYG army against the Houthis. End Note.) Zafir told PolOff on November 19 that Ahmar had consulted with the Houthis to see if they would withdraw from Jebel Dukhan in exchange for a Saudi commitment not to allow the ROYG to attack the Houthis from Saudi territory. The Houthis reportedly agreed to these conditions, and Ahmar went to Riyadh to deliver the message.

Zaid said, however, that the Saudis were not willing to give the Houthis anything in exchange for their commitment to withdraw from Jebel Dukhan and stop attacking Saudi forces. (Comment: Post has not been able to confirm these reports with Ahmar directly. End Comment.) Zafir reported that the Houthis also chose Rabaea Amin al-Okaimi, a sheikh from Al Jawf, to serve as a mediator with the SAG. Okaimi is reportedly in Saudi Arabia at the moment.

17. (S/NF) Zafir told PolOff that the Houthis are asking the SAG to stop military action in Jebel Dukhan, to cease attacks against the Houthis, and to refrain from allowing the ROYG to launch attacks against the Houthis from Saudi territory. If the SAG were to agree, he said Houthis wanted the Zaydi sheikhs on the Saudi side of the border to guarantee the terms; they are reportedly very warrior-like tribes that will keep the Saudi army out of their territories if they have given their word to do so. Zafir reported that the SAG agreed to these conditions in principle, but nothing is official yet.

18. (S/NF) Iryani claimed to have no information about a separate line of communication between the Houthis and the SAG. He did agree, however, that any ceasefire agreement between the ROYG and the Houthis would have to be agreed to in advance by the Saudis and coordinated with their forces so all hostilities could cease at the same time.

HOPE FROM THE HAJJ

19. (S/NF) Zafir believes that the November 25 beginning of the Hajj could encourage the Saudis to at least stop their direct military involvement in the war, as they do not want to be accused of killing Muslims during that holy time, as Iran will surely do. Zafir also argues that the Saudis will have difficulty achieving their goal of clearing a 10 kilometer buffer zone on the Yemeni side of the border -- as the SAG appears to be attempting to do -- without killing civilians and inciting anti-Saudi sentiment.

HOW SERIOUS IS SALEH?

110. (S/NF) Zaid thinks Saleh may just be feigning an interest in a ceasefire agreement. One reason he believes so is the people Saleh recommended for the ceasefire commission)- including Northwest Region Commander Muhsin -- are people he is rumored to want to get rid of in order to clear the way for his son Ahmed to become president. (Comment: Since the beginning of the Sixth War, many analysts have expressed the opinion that it is an internal proxy war aimed at weakening potential rivals to the president's son. End Comment.) According to Zaid, Saleh will get serious about the ceasefire if he feels the war directly threatens his presidency or his son's prospects to succeed him, or if the Saudis stop financing his war. Even if Saleh wanted to stop the war, however, Zaid is not sure he would be able to, given the Saudis' involvement and the desire of certain factions with the SAG to keep it going. "The decision to stop the war is not in Saleh's hands. It's in Riyadh," he said.

COMMENT

111. (S/NF) The ceasefire discussions underway are incipient but promising nonetheless, if only because they are the first such discussions since the war began in August. Many Yemeni analysts believe that Saudi Arabia will make or break them, a view that would seem to ignore the disinterest each of the warring parties has shown to date in anything other than a military solution. END COMMENT.
SECHE